

# Celia and the Ghost.

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Illustrated by Treyer Evans.



THROUGH half-closed eyes that were still heavy with sleep, Celia saw that the dawn had come—the early dawn of a summer morning. The decision to which she had come the night before floated vaguely on the surface of her mind. She could see the letter that she had written and addressed to her mother; she had put it on the mantelpiece under the spotted engraving of some tiresome cathedral. She could hear the footsteps of the bored policeman passing slowly in the street below.

The letter was as follows:—

“DEAREST MOTHER,—I love you, and father, and my brother. That love comes of nature, and nothing could ever alter it. But I am going away. Early in the morning, before anybody else in the house is awake, I shall start. Don’t be angry or frightened. I am not going to commit suicide, or do anything disgraceful. I can take care of myself, and I have with me five pounds that I have saved. I shall write to you, too, so that you will know I am well and safe. But I am going, because I must.

“I wonder if you will understand. I don’t think a girl of seventeen ought to be sick of life as I am. I am sick of the quarrels and sordid economies of home. I am sick of the drudgery of the office, and the tea-shop luncheons, and everything. I have no liberty. I do not live—I only execute orders.

“So I am going, without any very definite plans, to see if the world has anything better for me. Perhaps it has not, and then no doubt I shall return, when my money is spent, and father will have the pleasure of calling me a fool and an idiot, as he does most days. But I shall have been alive for a little while. Your loving and unhappy CELIA.”

No, she did not repent of the decision. Soon she would get up, but there was plenty of time; nobody in the house would be moving for hours yet. Her body was suffused with a pleasant and equable warmth. Her mind tasted already the strong joy of freedom.

And on no account, she told herself firmly, must she go to sleep again.

Bright sunlight, and London all behind her. She must have been walking for hours, and her sensible shoes were white with dust. But she did not feel tired; she was filled with a sense of exhilaration, almost of triumph. Sitting on the stile that led to the field-path she ate hungrily the apples and biscuits that she had bought. Not for years, she thought, had she breakfasted so deliciously. And where she was she neither knew nor cared. At the next village she would make discreet inquiries, and if there were a railway-station and a train that went seaward she would take a ticket. She had been too wise to take a ticket at any London station, lest capture should follow.

She glanced at a diminutive, thoroughly inexpensive, gun-metal watch. In about one hour and a half, she calculated, Mr. Abrahams, portly and white-whiskered, would be demanding the stenographic services of Miss Melrose, and he would be informed that Miss Melrose had not arrived at the office. Whereupon Mr. Abrahams would request that his soul might be blessed and become apoplectic. His sweet son, Mr. Sam Abrahams, aged twenty-two, would also be disappointed. Celia recalled with disgust that Mr. Sam Abrahams distinctly leered, and that he had once put his grimy hand on her shoulder. Ugh!

And at that moment another hand touched her shoulder, ever so lightly. Celia sprang to her feet, thus dropping an apple and the greater part of a biscuit.

“So you’ve run away, little girl, have you?” said a man’s voice. Well, yes, Celia admitted, it was a pleasant voice. And she liked the looks of the young man who stood on the other side of the stile. Not handsome, perhaps, but interesting—which, in Celia’s view, was so much better. Yet it was necessary to show that Miss Melrose knew how to take care of herself.

“How dare you speak to me?” she said,

with breathless firmness. "If you don't go away at once I'll——"

"Useless for two reasons. Firstly, there is no policeman for you to call. Secondly, there is no necessity to call him. Unconventional I may be, but I would not dream of hurting or offending you in any way, little runaway."

He knew that she had run away? He might take steps to send her back again. Clearly this man must be managed.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, shyly. "What makes you think that I have run away?"

"The satchel on your back, the dust on your shoes, but above all the ecstasy in your eyes. May I have this?" He picked up the biscuit.

"But I've bitten it!" exclaimed Celia.

"That's why," said the young man, calmly. "I'll give you the apple, though I am not the serpent nor even Paris."

"Don't understand," said Celia, as she took the proffered apple.

"No? Did you never hear of the prize of beauty?"

"But I'm not," said Celia, blushing.

"After you had gone to bed last night," said the young man, "your father and mother were speaking of you, and they agreed that you were a dangerously pretty girl. Of course, their devotion to you may prejudice them in your favour, but I must say that I agree with them."

"You were not there last night. You can't have been. I don't know you. In fact," she added, a little feebly, "I ought not to be speaking to you."

"No," he said, "you don't know me. But all the same I am a friend of the family. Also—as I should possibly have explained before—I am a ghost."

At this surprising statement Celia was compelled to laugh.

"A ghost?" she said. "You're a very substantial ghost. Do ghosts wear flannel suits and straw hats, and appear at nine in the morning, and eat what's left of my biscuit, and then smoke a Russian cigarette, as you're doing? A ghost, indeed! What-ever do you mean?"

"I am a ghost," he repeated, "just as surely as you are Celia Melrose." She was a little startled to find that he knew her name. "It is as easy for a ghost to be solid and opaque as it is for it to be vaporous and transparent. It is as easy for it to appear at nine in the morning as at midnight. Also there are two kinds of ghosts. The story-tellers

speak only of one kind of ghost—the ghost of what has been. That's ignorance. I belong to the other kind. I am the ghost of what will be. Coming events cast their shadows before. It is true that I am solid, but I am also just such a shadow."

"A shadow of what?" said Celia, almost in a whisper. For she loved no man and yet longed to love, and this type of man—if he had not been only a ghost—appealed.

"The shadow," he said, gravely, "of your lover, your husband, the father of your children. You will love me as I shall love you—and what more has the earth for anybody? I will tell you more. In a year's time you and I will be standing here by this stile. The man that I shall then be will have forgotten, and you also will have forgotten——"

"Never!" exclaimed Celia. "It's far too extraordinary. I shall remember this to my dying day." But even as she said it she looked at the man, and commonplace clothes could not prevent her conviction that she was indeed speaking to a being of another world.

"You also will have forgotten," the man repeated, calmly. "Why do you doubt me?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Celia. "You knew that I had run away. You know my name. That was all right. But then you went on to speak of the devotion of my father and mother. Mummy's fond of me, I know, though she's sometimes cross. Matter of fact, when I ran away I made my letter to her just as nice as I possibly could. But my father's temper's awful. You don't know the things he says to me. I simply couldn't stand it any longer. Why, if I'd thought they both cared for me very much I wouldn't have dreamed of running away."

"There is a saying, Celia, that to know everything is to forgive everything. Your father teaches music, I think."

"Yes—it's his profession."

"And the poor man's a real musician. He has not been successful as a composer so far, and he does not know—as I do—that success will come to him before very long. Meanwhile, he teaches the piano to duffers. Think what that means. Every day, on the average, his true and sensitive ear is tortured with seven hundred and eighty-six wrong notes. I include Sundays, when he does not give lessons, or the average would be much higher. And he goes through this continuous martyrdom for the sake of those he loves—your mother, your brothers at school, and you,

Celia. Then he is a poor man. He is bothered always with debts and money troubles. He had to pawn his watch to buy your last birthday present. He just manages to keep on the right side of bankruptcy. The wonder is that he has not been driven into raving lunacy. As it is, his temper and language are frequently deplorable—but his whole life speaks more loudly than his language and contradicts it.”

Celia's pretty mouth twitched a little, and there were tears in her eyes, but she controlled herself.

“Oh, dear!” she said. “I didn't know. I wish you hadn't told me about the watch. What a beast I've been! And it's not true that he's always in a temper. Often he says things in his grim sort of way that make us laugh. Ghost, you seem to know everything—tell me what I can do.”

The ghost smiled an enigmatic smile. “All that a runaway can do,” he said, “is to enjoy the perfect sense of freedom—the escape from drudgery and routine—so long as the money lasts. I think you have five pounds and some small change. Up to that point you can live your own life, develop your individuality, assert your claim to put yourself outside the circle of—”

Celia stamped her foot. “Stop talking that nonsense!” she said, angrily. Perhaps she had just a touch of her father's temper.

And still the ghost smiled enigmatically.

“You must admit,” he said, “that it would have been easier to tell you what you might have done if you had not run away.”

“What?”

“One thing has already occurred to your mind, I think. You make thirty shillings a week, you know, at the office. But I will tell you of another thing. Bad temper is infectious. When your father is furious your mother is cross and you are sulky. Good temper is infectious, but not so instantaneously. Still in three days an invincibly equable temper will make its effect. One more point—it is just as easy to talk, to be entertaining, to take a little trouble, in the home circle as it is when other people are present. Believe me, Celia, it is vulgar to have ‘company manners.’”

“Yes, you may call me vulgar,” said Celia, mournfully. “I'm such a lot of worse things as well that it doesn't matter much. But I never meant any harm. Really, I didn't. It was only that I didn't think, or didn't know, or looked at things the wrong way.”

“That is quite true,” said the ghost, gravely.

“Good-bye, ghost. I'm going home now—

at once. They'll be angry with me, and I'll endure it. I suppose I've lost my job in the City, haven't I?”

“I think Mr. Abrahams generally sacks people who absent themselves without good reasons. But in your case the son, Mr. Sam Abrahams, might intercede with success. He is sometimes kind to pretty girls, you know, and he always expects them to—to pay for it.”

“Then I will get work elsewhere. And now I must telegraph home so that they won't be anxious. Can you tell me where the nearest telegraph office is?”

“I could, but I can give you better help than that. All ghosts—the ghosts of the future just as much as the ghosts of the past—have strange powers. I will give to you a power that no human being has had yet, though at some point in their lives every man and every woman would give all they possess—and many would even give their lives—to have that power.”

Celia looked at him with big eyes, spell-bound.

“What is that power?” she asked.

“Simply,” he said, in his ordinary voice—and perhaps he was the more impressive because he was never for a moment histrionic—“simply the power to put back the time of the whole world for a few hours, so that the things which happened in these hours will not have happened at all.”

“Yes, I see,” said Celia, excitedly. “But it's impossible. How do I do it?”

“Move back the hands of your little watch. I promise you that the time of the whole world shall move backward with them.”

“I've been told,” said Celia, “that it's bad for a watch to move the hands backwards. But I don't care; I don't care if it breaks. I believe in you. I'm going to do it.”

And she did. Perhaps it was really bad for the watch, for it made a knocking sound. It knocked louder. It knocked as the engine of a motor-car knocks just before it sends in its resignation. And then—

And then Celia, with slowly-opening eyes, recognized that it was only a knock at her bedroom door. She heard her mother's plaintive voice.

“Celia, you've already been called once. Why don't you get up? The bathroom's ready for you. And you don't want to be late at the office.”

“So sorry, mummy,” Celia called, cheerfully. “I'll get up at once and hurry like anything.”



There had been times when she had met such appeals with a certain acerbity.

She sprang from her bed and stretched her arms wide, her head thrown backward. What a blessed sense of relief! So she had not really run away. She had not really hurt the people she really loved. She had fallen asleep again after all, and had dreamed the most delightful dream that she had ever known.

The letter she had written to her mother was still on the mantelpiece under the spotted engraving. Celia took it down, and spoke to it as if it had been a living being.

"Do you know what I'm going to do with you, you silly piece of iniquity?" said Celia. "I'm going to put you in prison—in my despatch-case. And in the luncheon hour I'm going to tear you to pieces and throw you over Blackfriars Bridge into the dirty Thames. There!"

She opened her despatch-case. It was rather a good one; it had been a birthday present to her from her father, as Celia remembered. It was at present the guardian of, amongst other things, five one-pound notes, and these Celia took out and placed under a hair-brush on her dressing-table. Then she threw her

letter into the despatch-case and shut and locked it.

Then followed a swirl of blue dressing-gown and a dash for the bath-room.

She dressed, her gun-metal watch assured her, in very good time, considering what a lot of hair she had to brush. Just before she went she took the one-pound notes from the table and put them in a very pretty hiding-place.

As she entered the breakfast-room she heard her father's voice.

"I don't believe they'll cut the light off. I shall get Levison's cheque at the end of this week, and then I can pay. However, I'll go and see them about it."

Celia greeted her parents with more cheerful warmth than usual, helped herself to quite a good deal of porridge, and sat down. Her mother looked at her curiously.

"You're looking very pleased at something or other, Celia," said Mrs. Melrose.

"I know," said Celia. "I had a simply lovely dream last night."

"Good," said her father. "Lovely dreams and Mr. Melrose's fees for tuition are about the only two things that have not gone up in price lately."

"And the dream was partly about you,



"'NEVER MIND, CELIA,' HE SAID, 'YOU'RE A GOOD GIRL TO DREAM NICE THINGS ABOUT ME.'"

father. Listen. You're going to have a great success as a composer. It's certain."

"A long time ago," said Mr. Melrose, "I dreamt that I saw a red and blue monkey playing the flute part from the 'William Tell' overture on the E-flat clarinet. It hasn't come true yet, but it may. So may the success."

"It's quite certain," said Celia, "and it's to come before very long. The ghost said so."

"A ghost?" said her mother. "Why, that sounds more like a nightmare."

"But it wasn't. He wasn't a bit like any other ghost."

"And possibly," said Mr. Melrose, "the success won't be like any other success. How goes the time?" His hand went instinctively to an empty watch-pocket and dropped. He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Twenty minutes, and then I start teaching the 'Moonlight Sonata' to the younger Miss Levison." As he went out he put his hand for a moment on his daughter's head. "Never mind, Celia," he said, "you're a good girl to dream nice things about me."

"Your father seems in much better spirits this morning," said Mrs. Melrose.

Celia assented. She could not remember that he had said anything particularly sunny, but his manner had been more cheerful than usual.

"He had a good night," Mrs. Melrose went on, "and that makes all the difference. It rests the nerves. It's all a question of the nerves. That's how it is that sometimes in the evening, when his nerves have been on the rack all day, he seems—well, almost irritable."

This was a mild but beautiful understatement.

"I know—I understand," said Celia. "And all the pupils will learn that 'Moonlight Sonata,' or at any rate part of it. The last movement exceeds the speed limit, I fancy, though I've forgotten the old thing. By the way, I've got five pounds towards the house-keeping." Her right hand dived into her blouse and produced the notes. "I've got everything I want for myself, and this is left over. It's been gradually accumulating."

"Oh, Celia! This is very good and kind of you. But I don't think your father will ever—"

"He must. If he won't let me pay even a little bit of my own expenses here, I'll go and live somewhere else and break my heart."

"I think, then, I'll just run up and give your father this before he goes out. It might rather—er—alter his plans for the

day. But, Celia, why don't you give it to him yourself?"

"Couldn't," said Celia, and looked suddenly mournful. "I couldn't explain, and I might begin to cry."

"But that's silly, child. Why, what on earth could there be to—"

But Celia had already escaped from the room.

At the office later that morning Sam Abrahams, who was not averse to a speculative investment, informed Celia that he intended to take her out to luncheon that day.

Celia did not even take the trouble to make a polite excuse.

"No, thank you," she said, glacially.

"All right," said Sam; "don't get cross. No one's bitten you."

Having thrown the shreds of her runaway letter into the Thames, Celia lunched alone in the Embankment Gardens. And for lunch she had biscuits and apples, but there are no ghosts in the Embankment Gardens.

If you ever meet the famous composer, Mr. Hubert Melrose, do not speak to him of the song with which he first achieved popularity. He may tell you that the song was muck, or he may express himself more strongly, but in any case he will be annoyed with you.

And this is a little ungrateful of him. The song, which was published a fortnight after Celia's dream, had a good melody, dignified and a little ecclesiastical. The words were suitable for singers of either sex, and the accompaniment was within the reach of the vicar's daughter. Its success was instantaneous. In a fortnight the publishers ceased to waste money on advertising it, as the song went by itself; only by the most strenuous efforts could they produce it as fast as they could sell it. And they became most polite and friendly to Mr. Hubert Melrose, and said that they had always been confident of his ultimate success—a fact they had previously forgotten to mention.

And then other compositions by Mr. Melrose, which had been published and had died years before, walked out of their tombs and followed in the song's triumphal procession. These were for the most part more ambitious and important work, and when the critics said that it was a pity that a composer with the genius of Hubert Melrose should waste his time in writing popular ballads, Mr. Melrose smiled with a malicious joy. Prosperity and a tactful daughter had improved his temper.



By Christmas he had given up tuition altogether, and was devoting himself solely to composition. And since he required a secretary who understood business and had a fair knowledge of music as well, Celia worked for him and abandoned Mr. Abrahams. "And a good thing too," said Sam Abrahams. "There never was any spirit of give-and-take about that girl."

One day Celia's father said to her: "It's just come back to my mind that a week or so before I published that putrescent song of mine you barged into breakfast one morning with a prophecy that I was to have a big success. You dreamed it, you said. It would interest me to have an account of that dream. I wish you'd just sit down and type it out."

"I'll try," said Celia, doubtfully. She put a sheet of paper into the machine, and for a few minutes stared at it blankly. Then she got up. "It's no good," she said, "I've forgotten absolutely every single thing about it. And I wish I hadn't."

Later in the evening she tried again, but in vain, to recall her dream. The ghost had told her the truth.

So when, a few evenings afterwards, she met at a dance the young man whose ghost she had seen in that dream she did not recognize him. Nor did he recognize her. They had to be introduced in the usual way. They danced every dance together that they did not sit

out together, and he took her down to supper, otherwise neither showed any special mark of preference for the other. Celia went home in a taxi-cab, which seemed to have touches of the seventh heaven about it.

And after that events moved rapidly.



"CELIA LUNCHEONED ALONE IN THE EMBANKMENT GARDENS."



In the following summer, on a sunny morning, Celia walked in the country on the outskirts of London with the young man whom she was very shortly to marry. She had been engaged to him for countless ages, she said, but it can only have been a few months, since he was the same young man that she met at that dance. When they reached the stile at the footpath across the fields Celia sat down to rest and to eat biscuits from a paper bag.

"I think I'm a greedy pig," said Celia, seriously.

"I'm sure of it," said the young man, with equal gravity.

And then they laughed at their own folly, as very happy people often do, and Celia dropped the greater part of the biscuit which was then in action. In an absent-minded way the young man picked it up and finished it.

Suddenly Celia sprang to her feet. "This has all happened before," she exclaimed. "I feel absolutely sure of it."

The young man smiled enigmatically.

"Quite likely," he said. "Perhaps we met long ago, some time when I wasn't there."

"No, I think you were there and I wasn't. But I wish I had been."

And as she said this she looked so perfectly adorable that it became imperative for the young man to kiss her.

"Oh!" said Celia. "You're terrible; suppose somebody had come past just then."

"Somebody didn't," the young man said, philosophically, and lit a Russian cigarette.



"'I THINK I'M A GREEDY PIG,' SAID CELIA, SERIOUSLY. 'I'M SURE OF IT,' SAID THE YOUNG MAN, WITH EQUAL GRAVITY."